Why continuous assessment matters in SM358

As you know from the *SM358 Introduction and Guide*, the core assessment for SM358 consists of four tutor-marked assignments (TMAs 01 – 04) and six interactive computer-marked assignments (iCMAs 51 – 56). To meet the continuous assessment threshold, you must score 30% or more on at least seven of these assignments, at least two of which must be TMAs.

Some of the advantages of this approach are:

- We hope you will see assignments as an integral part of your learning rather than as a hurdle that must be overcome in order to pass the module.
- Feedback has been improved in successive presentations, and the questions refined to rehearse many of the skills most needed in a typical SM358 exam.
- The iCMAs give immediate feedback and hints. Because you can submit answers to many different variants of the same question, you can reach a point where you are confident of being able to answer all questions of a given type.
- With less emphasis on marks, you can approach your tutor for hints and advice if you are completely stuck on a TMA question.
- The introduction of iCMAs allows the TMAs to be slightly shorter, giving tutors more time to help with specific requests for help.

You may think that it would be preferable for your continuous assessment mark to count directly towards your module grade. In fact, this “advantage” is largely illusionary. For example, to get a Grade 1, you must exceed a certain exam mark, and this must be done independently of your continuous assessment mark, no matter how good this might be. For obvious reasons, exam marks tend to be lower than continuous assessment marks, so the main factor determining a module grade is always the exam mark. If the continuous assessment mark has any direct influence, it is generally to reduce grades of students who have done well in the exam, but have not done so well in continuous assessment!

Nevertheless, there is a very strong *indirect* link between module grades and continuous assessment. In a module where only the exam score counts towards your grade, there is just as much incentive to perform strongly in the continuous assessment in order to gain the skills needed to do well the exam. In SM358, in particular, we can say from our experience of previous presentations that if you work hard on the continuous assessment, we would be very surprised if you did not do well in the exam. There can be no guarantees, but the clear expectation is there, as you can see for yourself from the following data.

Table 1 shows the numbers of exam attendees who completed different numbers of core assignments in the 2010 presentation of SM358. The shaded area covers students who met the continuous assessment threshold. Four students took the exam without satisfying this threshold, and failed the module for this reason (having also failed the exam). The 141 students in the shaded region all met the continuous assessment threshold, and the largest group of these students (67) completed all 10 of the core assignments.

For comparison, Table 2 shows similar data for students who were absent from the main exam. The largest group of these students (24) did no assignments at all. 14 students did enough TMAs, but not enough iCMAs to meet the continuous assessment threshold. Finally, 9 students met the continuous assessment threshold but did not sit the exam (some of these students may be planning to sit the April exam instead).

Table 1: SM358 Exam attendees in 2010

	0 TMAs	1 TMA	2 TMAs	3 TMAs	4 TMAs
0 iCMAs	0	0	0	0	1
1 iCMAs	0	0	0	0	0
2 iCMAs	0	1	1	0	0
3 iCMAs	0	0	0	0	3
4 iCMAs	0	0	0	11	5
5 iCMAs	0	1	7	10	16
6 iCMAs	0	0	11	12	67

Table 2: SM358 Exam non-attendees in 2010

	0 TMAs	1 TMA	2 TMAs	3 TMAs	4 TMAs
0 iCMAs	24	7	3	1	0
1 iCMAs	0	3	0	2	0
2 iCMAs	0	2	5	3	0
3 iCMAs	0	0	0	0	0
4 iCMAs	0	0	0	0	0
5 iCMAs	0	0	1	2	1
6 iCMAs	1	1	1	0	4

Table 3 shows the mean exam scores for the various student groups in Table 1. Some of the student numbers are fairly small, so fluctuations are to be expected, but the general trend is clear: the more assignments you do, the better your exam mark is likely to be. Students with 4 TMAs and 5 or 6 iCMAs got exceptionally high exam marks, and this is reflected in the very high mean scores of 77.5% and 69.5%, respectively.

Table 4 shows pass:fail ratios for exam attendees with different numbers of completed assignments. For example, the student group with all 10 core assignments had 65 passes and 2 fails. Both Table 3 and Table 4 suggest that it is risky to complete only 2 TMAs, no matter how many iCMAs you finish. If unexpected circumstances during the

year mean that you can only complete 2 TMAs, it may be useful to note that it is possible to pass SM358 from this position, but this cannot be recommended. It is far better to complete 3 TMAs, and better yet to do all 4.

Table 3: SM358 Mean exam scores for exam sitters in 2010

	0 TMAs	1 TMA	2 TMAs	3 TMAs	4 TMAs
0 iCMAs	–	–	–	–	6.0
1 iCMAs	–	–	–	–	–
2 iCMAs	–	17.0	24.0	–	–
3 iCMAs	–	–	–	–	60.0
4 iCMAs	–	–	–	43.7	62.0
5 iCMAs	–	23.0	46.0	62.6	69.5
6 iCMAs	–	–	35.3	60.8	77.5

Table 4: SM358 Pass: fail ratios for exam sitters in 2010

	0 TMAs	1 TMA	2 TMAs	3 TMAs	4 TMAs
0 iCMAs	–	–	–	–	0:1
1 iCMAs	–	–	–	–	–
2 iCMAs	–	0:1	0:1	–	–
3 iCMAs	–	–	–	–	3:0
4 iCMAs	–	–	–	8:3	5:0
5 iCMAs	–	0:1	5:2	9:1	16:0
6 iCMAs	–	–	4:7	10:2	65:2

Finally, Table 5 shows the numbers of students with Grades 1 or 2 with different numbers of completed assignments. I think the advantage in doing all, or nearly all, the assignments is very clear.

Table 5: SM358 Grade 1 or 2 numbers for exam sitters in 2010

	0 TMAs	1 TMA	2 TMAs	3 TMAs	4 TMAs
0 iCMAs	–	–	–	–	0
1 iCMAs	–	–	–	–	–
2 iCMAs	–	0	0	–	–
3 iCMAs	–	–	–	–	1
4 iCMAs	–	–	–	1	1
5 iCMAs	–	0	0	3	9
6 iCMAs	–	–	1	6	32

Note also that in 2010, the mean TMA and iCMA scores were 77% and 82.2%, respectively -- well above the minimum requirement of 30%.